

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Biological Conservation

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/biocon

Letter to the Editor

A moral imperative to preserve other species: Reply to Kareiva and Marvier



If Kareiva and Marvier want to advance discussion of the proper goals of conservation, they will need to clearly state their positions and avoid confusing criticism of those positions with judgments about their personal morality. They can't reasonably complain that Primack and I have misinterpreted their views, when their stated views contradict one another. In one essay to which our editorial (Cafaro and Primack, 2014) responded, they describe efforts to reintroduce extirpated native species, such as wolves, as misplaced "nostalgia" for "the world as it once was," glibly justify humanity's incipient extinction of polar bears as a function of a "changing environment," and suggest that nonhuman species should be sacrificed if that will benefit people economically (Kareiva et al., 2011). Yet now they say that they "believe unequivocally that human-caused extinction is a moral wrong" (Marvier and Kareiva, 2014). This is incoherent.

Calling an action morally wrong means upholding the principle that people should avoid doing it. It is not a matter of expressing particularly strong feelings, as Marvier and Kareiva (2014) erroneously suggests. Calling anthropogenic extinction a moral wrong means affirming that when people's economic activities threaten to extinguish another species, we should modify or cease those activities (Rolston, 1989). Kareiva and Marvier nowhere clearly affirm such a principle. Instead, their original essays (Kareiva et al., 2011; Kareiva and Marvier, 2012) advise conservationists to work with corporations to promote economic growth, a leading cause of biodiversity loss, and to embrace an "Anthropocene Epoch" in which humanity bends nature ever more fully to our will. It does not appear possible to square this approach to conservation with a serious moral commitment to prevent species extinctions. This is suggested, for example, by the fact that they disparage parks and protected areas for violating people's economic rights (Kareiva and Marvier, 2012), while neglecting to

mention their irreplaceable role in securing other species' right to continued existence. Their original papers also made numerous bogus empirical claims that are not supported by the scientific literature (Doak et al., 2014)—yet another indication of a cavalier attitude toward threatened and endangered species.

Marvier and Kareiva's (2014) new letter combines useful, well-established points (e.g. the potential value of creating broad coalitions to protect biodiversity) with misleading ones (e.g. saddling those and only those who affirm biodiversity's intrinsic value with a vague and objectionable "moral certitude"). I remain skeptical of their overall approach to conservation, as defined by the entirety of their writings. If conservationists hope to keep the Anthropocene epoch from devolving into the Homogenocene (the age of dullness) or the Thanatocene (the age of death), we will need to advocate for strong, society-wide moral and legal commitments aimed at preventing the extinction of other species.

References

- Cafaro, P., Primack, R., 2014. Species extinction is a great moral wrong. *Biol. Conserv.* 170, 1–2.
- Doak, D., Bakker, V., Goldstein, B., Hale, B., 2014. What is the future of conservation? *Trends Ecol. Evol.* 29, 77–81.
- Kareiva, P., Lalasz, R., Marvier, M., 2011. Conservation in the Anthropocene: beyond solitude and fragility. *Breakthrough J.*, 29–37.
- Kareiva, P., Marvier, M., 2012. What is conservation science? *BioScience* 62, 962–969.
- Marvier, M., Kareiva, P., 2014. Extinction is a moral wrong but conservation is complicated. *Biol. Conserv.* <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.biocon.2014.04.015>.
- Rolston, H., 1989. *Duties to endangered species*. Philosophy Gone Wild: Environmental Ethics. Prometheus Press, Buffalo, pp. 206–219.

Philip Cafaro*

Department of Philosophy and School of Global Environmental
Sustainability, Colorado State University,
Fort Collins, CO 80525, USA

* Tel.: +1 970 482 8279.

E-mail address: philip.cafaro@colostate.edu

Available online 6 June 2014